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ABSTRACT

This paper was part of a symposium focusing on the role of educational administrators in school-based research. The author states that the role of research for the school administrator should be to support decision-making, both in providing a rational basis on which decisions can be made and in helping administrators feel confident their decisions are good because they are based on true conditions. (Author/MLF)

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THE ROLE IN RESEARCH FOR THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR

SESSION 3.03

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Symposium:

THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATORS IN SCHOOL BASED RESEARCH

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THE ROLE IN RESEARCH FOR THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR

School administrators must balance processes, demands, and influences which impinge on their school systems - both internally and externally. They have to cope with change and uncertainty, while at the same time try to maintain stability in their organizations. They are called upon to solve problems and resolve conflicts as well as provide leadership and direction for their school systems.

Research can and should support school administrators through systematic investigation and fact-finding to help them rationalize the conditions with which they have to deal. Basically, the role of research for school administrators should be to support decision making; not only in providing a rational basis for making decisions, but in helping them to feel confident that their decisions were sound because they were based on hard data.

Conversely, if research is to be of value, it is incumbent upon administrators to support those activities. It is my purpose to point out some ways that support can be provided as well as some precautions which must be taken. Although it may not be necessary, I will preface my remarks by saying that I am a practicing administrator and will be speaking from a very pragmatic orientation.

First, I tend to look at the term "research" in a much broader sense than the researcher would. I like the functional definition of educational research that the National Institute of Education (N.I.E.) uses: "The term 'educational research' includes research (basic and applied), planning, surveys, evaluations, investigations, experiments developments and demonstrations." I am sure that this definition is rejected by the bona fide researchers but it opens up a new world for many non-researchers to benefit from something called research - maybe I should say, "systematic inquiry and problem-solving in whatever form it takes."

Secondly, I would insist that educational research be addressed more toward the problems and needs of education than to methodological problems of research. There is often a communications gap between the researchers and the administrators because of the difference in orientations. Researchers tend to communicate with other researchers rather than with practitioners. At the same time, the practitioners should become more knowledgeable about research techniques and findings. It is my opinion that if better ways could be found to "package" systematic inquiry in the practical applications referred to in the N.I.E. definition, we could close this communications gap and focus attention more on education.

It may sound strange to hear research referred to in management or business terms, but I am sure that you are aware of the influence that the business community and the public are exerting on school administrators to think in productive terms. My purpose in using them here is to emphasize

the points to be made. For example, in education we struggle with "dissemination and diffusion" while the business community works with "packaging, advertising, and delivery systems." One obvious problem with this analogy is that business and industry produce products according to particular consumer needs and demands,while much research in education is addressed, "To Whom it May Concern." I feel, however, that progress is being made through our educational planning activities which somewhat compares with engineering in the business and industry community.

If I may be allowed another analogy, a model from the communications field illustrates the flow of the process which I think is needed. The relationships of Bell Laboratory-Western Electric-AT&T, where the Bell Laboratory does basic research to generate the ideas, Western Electric engineers the systems and equipment to make the ideas work and AT&T puts them into operation, somewhat conceptualizes the structure that would be effective.

In education, there is not this kind of coordination or direct flow from basic research to the classroom. At least, it is not apparent. Some basic research is "engineered" in the Research and Development Educational Laboratories; however, new ideas usually get into the classroom via commercial routes - textbooks, instructional materials and equipment and learning systems. Let me hasten to say that I do not intend any criticism of the commercial activities. My purpose is to point out that there is not a direct flow from basic research into the classroom in the educational research design.

On a much smaller scale, in my home school district of Richmond, Virginia, we are trying to develop a similar concept using applied research within context of the planning process. The long-range planning at the system level, short-range planning at the individual school level, and annual planning by the individual classroom teachers provide a process in which basic ideas can flow directly to the classroom from the system level, as well as from the classroom back to the system level. This vertical "top-down, bottom-up" process allows for basic research findings and local evaluations in planning for instructional programs. A horizonal dimension is also a part of the process. Parents, students, and community individuals and groups participate in the planning at all levels which keeps the educators and administrators honest. In my opinion, the instructional decisions which are made are more realistic when based on a systematic process such as I have described.

For my purposes, and I believe for most school administrators, I am willing to accept this activity as research. The skills of inquiry and research methodology are used in the needs assessment; determining goals and objectives; setting performance objective levels; developing strategies; detailing implementation plans involving personnel, facilities, financial, and other resource needs; and, finally in evaluating the results. This process has been established in the Richmond Public Schools over the past four years and is being improved and refined with each passing year at all levels throughout the district. A good number of our teachers, supervisors, and administrators are taking research courses to develop their skills. I am particularly pleased when I see teachers conducting research projects in their own classes.

In addition to the planning activities, the Richmond Public Schools participate in many research projects with university and college faculty members and students. We benefit greatly from this relationship. In fact, we are actively soliciting research on topics that we would like to have investigated. For example, the Department of Planning and Development has had over 500 suggestions of problems to be studied submitted by principals, teachers, and supervisors throughout the school system. These will be used as the basis for a list of areas in which we would like research conducted.

Currently, major efforts are being made in developing our data base. We are updating several computer data systems as well as developing new ones. The student information, personnel, financial, budget, and payroll systems are being updated; instructional management systems are being developed, and a computerized spot map and student projection system are in the pilot stage. We realize that we must have a well-maintained data base to support the planning and decision making in the school system.

Another major project which was begun this year was a reorganization of the schools which includes planning for improvements in curriculum and instruction, administration and support services; renovations or new construction of facilities; and, planning for a declining enrollment.

Standards have been developed and surveys made of the mechanical and structural condition of the high schools, as well as determining their educational adequacy. Also, all schools 60 or more years old have been surveyed to determine their long-range usefulness. Later the middle and elementary schools will be surveyed against standards and changes planned to eliminate the deficiencies.

Following a rather thorough process in which the community was involved, a reorganization plan for our high schools was approved by the School Board. The plan calls for combining the seven (7) high schools into three (3) complexes or large high schools. Long-range planning calls for the construction of a new middle school and a sports complex for city-wide use by the schools.

As you can imagine, the comprehensive planning that has already been conducted and the planning and development job yet to be done is tremendous. With the exception of one (1) paid consultant who worked with us on the survey of schools 60 or more years old, the standards were developed; surveys conducted; reports and presentations made; and, the comprehensive planning for the high school complexes just begun this month were done with no additional personnel. Although literally hundreds of people have been involved, a systematic planning format has facilitated the broad involvement which has resulted in realistic but innovative designs built on a data base and long-range projections.

An example of the type of involvement in the deliberations prior to the decision on the high schools was a seminar which included Richmond's most knowledgeable citizens who were invited to discuss future land usage in the city which might impact on the schools over the next ten to twenty years. The results of the seminar were invaluable to our planning for the future.

Admittedly, we didn't develop much data that we could test by a regression analysis or against a chi square to determine significance; however, for practical purposes and within the time frames that practitioners must operate, I am convinced that our procedures deserve the respect of being called applied research, at least.

My remarks up to this point preface the final comments relative to my assigned topic: The Role in Research for the School Administrator." Obviously, I cannot generalize on the basis of Richmond's experience. There are some aspects of school-based research, however, that require understanding and support from the school administrator, no matter what the conditions are. I offer the following four points for your consideration:

1. Commitment Must Be Based on Understanding

   If school-based research is to have meaning, the school administrator must first understand what research can and cannot do and have respect for well-documented and data-based information. Secondly, there must be a commitment, based on this understanding, to "see it through." The research process is not as fast as "shooting from the hip" on decisions but must be anticipated to give time for effective results. Also, it must be recognized that research usually indicates change for improvement. The change process can be rough. Good research can help the school administrator stay "on course" through change if he understands and respects the support which can be derived from it. The higher the risk, the more need there is for hard data support.

2. School-based Research Must Be Built

   School-based research must be carefully developed over a period of time. Not only the techniques and understandings must be developed, but respect for research has to come through usage of the results over a period of time which will build confidence in the systematic approach to problem-solving.

3. All School Personnel Must Be Oriented to School-based Research

   Although research may not answer all questions, I believe that we have a better chance if all personnel are oriented to a rational approach to problem solving. The school administrator must perform some tasks to accomplish this. These would include:

   a. Develop a well qualified research staff or in the smaller districts, at least include a well qualified research specialist on the staff to provide leadership and staff development in school-based research activities.

b. Require a rational approach to problem solving throughout the district to encourage teachers and administrators to conduct research projects in the schools. Require that decisions made at the school and department level be supported by evidence and/or hard data.

4. Provide Adequate Resources

The low priority which has traditionally been given to funding educational research has been documented many times. In my opinion, the level of funding should depend on the expectations of the research function. There are school districts that are content to let research be limited to the data collection level, to satisfy state report requirements. Funding for this purpose should be low. On the other hand, if the expectations are for sophisticated high level research, it can be very expensive. In Richmond approximately 1.6 percent of the operating budget goes to the Department of Planning and Development. This is not up to the 3 to 5 percent that many researchers advocate, but our current expectations are for establishing and developing school-based research as I described above. Later, if the expectations are for more sophisticated research, we will have to fund it.

In summarizing this paper, I would point out that there must be a partnership between the school administrator and the researcher in the development of school-based research. Techniques must be developed, communication channels established, methods of involving others in the participatory process, and effective means found for disseminating and diffusing the results to the classroom teacher and other users.

As word of precaution, let me suggest that you don't expect research to provide all of the answers and make everything work smoothly. Just as a road map doesn't insure a safe arrival at your destination, nor will a navigation chart insure that the ship's captain will stay on course, educational decisions are still dependent on human judgment for their success, even though they are based on good research. Research can provide the road map or navigation chart but administrators must continue to make the final decisions.